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What Is Sensitivity Training?

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Sensitivity training is one type of experience-based learning in which participants work together in a small group over an extended period of time learning through analysis of their own experiences. The primary setting is the T Group (T for training) in which a staff member sets up an ambiguous situation which allows participants to choose the roles they will play while observing and reacting to the behavior of other members and in turn having an impact on them. The perceptions and reactions are the data for learning. T-Group theory emphasizes each participant's responsibility for his own learning, the staff person's role of facilitating examination and understanding, provision for detailed examination required to draw valid generalizations, creation of authentic interpersonal relationships which facilitate honest and direct communication, and the development of new skills in working with people. Goals of sensitivity training are to allow participants to gain a picture of the impact that they make on others and to facilitate the study of group dynamics and of larger organizational concepts such as status, influence, division of labor, and styles of managing conflict. Research on sensitivity training is rather scarce and often subject to serious methodological problems, but some generalizations can be supported. (Included with notes on research is a list of recommended readings from seven sources.) (JS)

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WHAT IS SENSITIVITY TRAINING?

In response to an ever-increasing number of queries regarding sensitivity training, we are presenting the following excerpt from a paper written by Charles Seashore, NTL Institute research director, for Wayne State University's Department of Political Science Mid-Career Education Project, April 1968.—The Editor.

Sensitivity training is one type of experience-based learning. Participants work together in a small group over an extended period of time, learning through analysis of their own experiences, including feelings, reactions, perceptions, and behavior. The duration varies according to the specific design, but most groups meet for a total of 10-40 hours. This may be in a solid block, as in a marathon weekend program or two to six hours a day in a one- or two-week residential program or spread out over several weekends, a semester, or a year.

The sensitivity training group may stand by itself or be a part of a larger laboratory training design which might include role playing, case studies, theory presentations, and intergroup exercises. This paper focuses mainly on the T Group (the *T* stands for *training*) as the primary setting for sensitivity training. However, many of the comments here also apply to other components of laboratory training.

A Typical T-Group Starter

The staff member in a typical T Group, usually referred to as the trainer, might open the group in a variety of ways. The following statement is an example:

> This group will meet for many hours and will serve as a kind of laboratory where each individual can increase his understanding of the forces which influence individual behavior and the performance of groups and organizations. The data for learning will be our own behavior, feelings, and reactions. We begin with no definite structure or organization, no agreed-upon procedures, and no specific agenda. It will be up to us to fill the vacuum created by the lack of these familiar elements and to study our group as we evolve. My role will be to help the group to learn from its own experience, but not to act as a traditional chairman nor to suggest how we should organize, what our procedure should be, or exactly what our agenda will include. With these few comments, I think we are ready to begin in whatever way you feel will be most helpful.

Into this ambiguous situation members then proceed to inject themselves. Some may try to organize the group by promoting an election of a chairman or the selection of a topic for discussion. Others may withdraw and wait in silence until they get a clearer sense of the direction the group may take. It is not unusual for an individual to try to get the trainer to play a more directive role, like that of the typical chairman.

Whatever role a person chooses to play, he also is observing and reacting to the behavior of other members and in turn is having an impact on them. It is these perceptions and reactions that are the data for learning.

Underlying Assumptions of T-Group Training

Underlying T-Group training are the following assumptions about the nature of the learning process which distinguish T-Group training from other more traditional models of learning:

1. *Learning responsibility.* Each participant is responsible for his own learning. What a person learns depends upon his own style, readiness, and the relationships he develops with other members of the group.
2. *Staff role.* The staff person's role is to facilitate the examination and understanding of the experiences in the group. He helps participants to focus on the way the group is working, the style of an individual's participation, or the issues that are facing the group.
3. *Experience and conceptualization.* Most learning is a combination of experience and conceptualization. A major T-Group aim is to provide a setting in which individuals are encouraged to examine their experiences together in enough detail so that valid generalizations can be drawn.
4. *Authentic relationships and learning.* A person is most free to learn when he establishes authentic relationships with other people and thereby increases his sense of self-esteem and decreases his defensiveness. In authentic relationships persons can be open, honest, and direct with one another so that they are communicating

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what they are actually feeling rather than masking their feelings.

5. *Skill acquisition and values.* The development of new skills in working with people is maximized as a person examines the basic values underlying his behavior as he acquires appropriate concepts and theory and as he is able to practice new behavior and obtain feedback on the degree to which his behavior produces the intended impact.

The Goals and Outcomes of Sensitivity Training

Goals and outcomes of sensitivity training can be classified in terms of potential learning concerning individuals, groups, and organizations.

1. *The individual point of view.* Most T-Group participants gain a picture of the impact that they make on other group members. A participant can assess the degree to which that impact corresponds with or deviates from his conscious intentions. He can also get a picture of the *range of perceptions* of any given act. It is as important to understand that different people may see the same piece of behavior differently—for example, as supportive or antagonistic, relevant or irrelevant, clear or ambiguous—as it is to understand the impact on any given individual. In fact, very rarely do all members of a group have even the same general perceptions of a given individual or a specific event.

   Some people report that they try out behavior in the T Group that they have never tried before. This experimentation can enlarge their view of their own potential and competence and provide the basis for continuing experimentation.

2. *The group point of view.* The T Group can focus on forces which affect the characteristics of the group such as the level of commitment and follow-through resulting from different methods of making decisions, the norms controlling the amount of conflict and disagreement that is permitted, and the kinds of data that are gathered. Concepts such as cohesion, power, group maturity, climate, and structure can be examined using the experiences in the group to better understand how these same forces operate in the back-home situation.

3. *The organization point of view.* Status, influence, division of labor, and styles of managing conflict are among organizational concepts that may be highlighted by analyzing the events in the small group. Subgroups that form can be viewed as analogous to units within an organization. It is then possible to look at the relationships between groups, examining such factors as competitiveness, communications, stereotyping, and understanding.

   One of the more important possibilities for a participant is that of examining the kinds of assumptions and values which underlie the behavior of people as they attempt to manage the work of the group. The opportunity to link up a philosophy of management with specific behaviors that are congruent with or antithetical to that philosophy makes the T Group particularly relevant to understanding the large organization.

Research on Sensitivity Training

Research evidence on the effectiveness of sensitivity training is rather scarce and often subject to serious methodological problems. The annotated bibliographies referred to in the suggested readings at the end of this paper are the best source for identifying available studies. The following generalizations do seem to be supported by the available data:

1. People who attend sensitivity training programs are more likely to improve their managerial skills than those who do not (as reported by their peers, superiors, and subordinates).
2. Everyone does not benefit equally. Roughly two-thirds of the participants are seen as increasing their skills after attendance at laboratories. This figure represents an average across a number of studies.
3. Many individuals report extremely significant changes and impact on their lives as workers, family members, and citizens. This kind of anecdotal report should be viewed cautiously in terms of direct application to job settings, but it is consistent enough that it is clear that T-Group experiences can have a powerful and positive impact on individuals.
4. The incidence of serious stress and mental disturbance during training is difficult to measure, but it is estimated to be less than one per cent of participants and in almost all cases occurs in persons with a history of prior disturbances.

Recommended Readings

Leland P. Bradford, Jack R. Gibb, and Kenneth D. Benne (Eds.), *T-Group Theory and Laboratory Method: Innovation in Re-education.* N.Y.: Wiley, 1964.

Robert L. Craig and Lester R. Bittel. *Training and Development Handbook.* N.Y.: McGraw-Hill, 1967.

"Problems in the Design and Interpretation of Research on Human Relations Training," by Roger Harrison, and "A Bibliography of Research," by Lewis Durham, Jack R. Gibb, and Eric S. Knowles, are presented together as Numbers 1 and 2 for 1967 in the NTL series, *Explorations in Human Relations Training and Research.*

Matthew B. Miles. *Learning to Work in Groups.* N.Y.: Teachers College, Columbia Univer., 1959.

Edgar H. Schein and Warren G. Bennis. *Personal and Organizational Change Through Group Methods.* N.Y.: Wiley, 1965.

R. Tannenbaum, I. R. Weschler, and F. Massarik. *Leadership and Organization: A Behavioral Science Approach.* N.Y.: McGraw-Hill, 1961.

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